Unravelling Family Fictions: Stories We Tell, Daughter Rite and My Life Without Me

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In this chapter, I compare *Stories We Tell* (2012) a recent documentary by Canadian actor and director, Sarah Polley and the feminist classic *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron,1979) to explore the ways in which it has become possible to reimagine the mother in women's cinema and specifically to represent her desire. Both films use a reflexive approach to home movies to highlight the stories which these movies conceal. Citron uses her father's super 8 footage, slowed down and manipulated, to highlight performances for the camera and the daughters' formation within the family. Polley, in her more overtly autobiographical film, shifts the focus onto the mother's desire, which is traditionally absent from moving image archives of family life, through the inclusion of 'fake' home movies. *Stories We Tell* redresses the marginalization of the mother in the earlier film by attempting to both represent her desire – through the enacted home movies which reveal her mother, Diane Polley's extra-marital affair – and *perform* it in the making of the film by putting her dead mother's wishes and ambitions for her family into motion. The mother's legacy is imagined and enacted not as a repressive but as inspiring and enabling the creative potential of those she has left behind. This concern with the idea of a maternal legacy echoes the theme of a previous film in which Polley took the leading role, *My Life Without Me* (Isabel Coixet, 2003) which I discuss in the final section of this chapter, which provides a radical re-working of the maternal melodrama.

Much feminist psychoanalytic film criticism has relied on a Freudian model of sexual difference which proposes the Oedipal moment where the child perceives the mother's 'lack' as pivotal. As Marianne Hirsch notes, Freud's narrative is based on a paradox which he could not see: while he insists that 'female fulfillment lies in the relation between mother and child, he posits a necessary and hostile rupture of that relation by the child' (Hirsch, 1989:169) Crucially, 'the mother's own part in that process [of separation] remains absent, erased from theoretical and narrative representation' and even 'feminist revisions of the Freudian plot' by writers such as Nancy Chodorow and Luce Irigaray continued to present '… a mother who is overly invested in her child, powerless in the world, a constraining rather than an enabling force in the girl's development, and an inadequate and disappointing object of identification' (ibid:169).

Michelle Citron's film *Daughter Rite* (1978) was a key and pioneering text within field of feminist documentary; it deconstructs confessional realism to highlight the unconscious ways in which daughters re-produce a discourse of the mother as 'abject'.[1] The film does this through juxtaposition of two tracks – the first track is of manipulated home movies of the mother and daughters filmed by the father where the stereotypical scenes of family life are displayed for the camera. Footage of holidays and other festive occasions, are however slowed down and repeated to highlight the strained and conflicted gestures and looks. The jerky de-familiarized images are accompanied by a diaristic voice-over which we presume is by the 'author' of the film who recounts her attempts to create an independent identity and her fears of becoming like her mother.

The second track is composed of observational and interview sequences in a realist style with two sisters who are also discussing their conflicted relationship with their

mother. Both see her as intrusive and unable to care for them even to the extent of failing to act when one of the daughters told her of her rape by her stepfather. These apparently documentary sequences (based on 35 interviews with daughters) are not explicitly revealed as drama until the film's credits) underlining the way in which the realist confessional mode provides no more truthful account of the mother's position than the home movies performance of family life.

The film suggests the ways in which the mother is marginalized as a subject within culture through the daughters' repeated criticism of her and insistence on her lack of self-awareness and inadequate mothering. More than two decades after it was made, Citron reflected on both on the conscious feelings she and audience members had towards it at the time as well as the secrets which remained opaque within it but which inform its 'structure of feeling' (Citron, 1999). As the title of her essay, 'Fleeing from Documentary', suggests, her aesthetic choices in the film are prompted by an anger which she was unable to name overtly but which signal its autobiographical significance. Aware of the pitfalls of autobiographical film-making - from the censorship of answers, feelings and experiences to the acting out in front of the camera what can't be acknowledged behind closed doors - Citron explains that she chose fiction as an 'escape hatch' to avoid the ethical discomforts involved in exhibiting someone else's life and claimed that the film was not autobiographical. However, she then claims that a neat taxonomy of the material in the film that she has just sketched, where the 'fictionalized' or 'imagined' elements are separated from material more directly drawn from her own experience does not hold in practice as these elements are less precisely separated than seems at first sight.

In other words, the film shows the characteristics of what Annette Kuhn identifies as 'a memory text' (Kuhn, 2000). The complex enunciation of the film and her denial of some of its autobiographical elements is, Citron, can see in retrospect, the impossibility of speaking directly about how she was abused as a child to her mother and of acknowledging the source of her anger in not feeling protected from this abuse by her mother. The subject of Citron's own abuse by her grandfather is not mentioned by her in the above chapter but instead she reveals that when her mother finally saw *Daughter Rite* it prompted her to make a painful revelation – that she herself had been abused as a child, a revelation facilitated Citron argues by the use of fiction in the film: 'A documentary film might have confronted my mother to speak before she was ready, and further more would have put me in control of the moment of confrontation' (Citron 1999: 282). The revelation of Citron's own abuse appears instead in her monograph (Citron, 1998).

In 1983, Citron made another film this time featuring an actual portrait her of mother, *Mother Right*, where the mother we discover is nothing like what we might imagine from seeing the earlier film. It becomes clear that the depressed mother who features in *Daughter Rite* is a projection of the daughter's own feelings. Here we see a different mother - she is a feisty, self-possessed woman who works in a gay bar in Hawaii, campaigns to raise AIDS awareness in the straight community and supports the co-workers and customers who have become her friends when they become ill.

Citron explains that she made *Mother Right* to assuage her guilt about the anger towards her mother in the earlier film (though it's not clear at that point whether she had recalled her experience of abuse or if her mother has confessed hers). The title -

Mother Right – references the term given by German anthropologist, Jakob Bachhofen, to describe archaic matriarchal society (Bachhofen, 1861): Citron's use of this term suggests the reinstatement of the mother as a significant cultural force in human society as opposed to the abject mother the daughter(s) repudiate in *Daughter Rite*. This archaic mother figure needs to be negated in Freud's version of the Oedipal trajectory as the child moves from his [sic] early fusion with her into an identification with the father. Citron recognizes this shift in her own life through growing up to be a film-maker (taking up the position and power of the Father who wielded the family camera, just as Sarah Polley becomes the family 'documentarist').

We might also read Citron's two films through a Kleinian lens where in *Daughter Rite* the mother becomes the object of the daughter's sadistic desires and in *Mother Right*, Citron makes reparation to her mother for her earlier anger. Klein develops her theory of the girl's development in her paper 'Infantile anxiety situations reflected in a work of art and in the creative impulse' (1929) where she surmises that the little girl:

> has a sadistic desire originating in the early stages of the Oedipus conflict to rob the mother's body of its contents, namely the father's penis, faeces, children, and to destroy the mother herself. This in turn gives rise to anxiety lest the other should in her turn rob the little girl herself of the contents of her body, especially of children, and lest her body should be destroyed and mutilated…. At a later stage of development, the content of the dread changes from the attacking mother to the dread that the real, loving mother may be lost and the girl will be left solitary and forsaken. (Mitchell, 1986: 22)

Klein uses this theory to interpret the story of the artist Ruth Kjar as told by Karin Michaelis. Klein comments on two portraits that Kjar produced – one of a wrinkled and disillusioned old woman and one of her mother as "slim, imperious, challenging…. she has the effect of a magnificent woman of primitive times". Klein takes these two portraits as indications of the sadistic desire to destroy in the case of the former which is then followed by a "need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty", commenting, "By so doing, a daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavour to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait.' (ibid:93)

In researching this essay, I had thought that reading Klein might provide a framework for some of this analysis of the representation of mother-daughter relations. However, while the discussion of the production of art in relation to infantile anxiety provides an interesting analogy with the trajectory of Citron's work, it seems to be more problematic than productive as an interpretive frame since it would actually seem to occlude the specifics of Citron's situation as a survivor of incest. A universalizing theory of "the little girl's development" in her phantasy life, has the effect of masking the real secret of sexual abuse which is the more immediate cause of Citron's anger against her mother. The idea that the mother has robbed the little girl of the contents of her body and mutilated her even if this is supposed to represent unconscious phantasy sits very uncomfortably with this particular story, which nonetheless echoes the stories of many abused girls. In this case, it is in fact the grandfather who has actually robbed the child of her body by his rape of her as

Citron finally feels able to articulate in her long personal, filmic and literary journey through the primary secrets of her family.

The horror of these events mean they cannot be spoken until well into Citron's adult life when the repressed feelings manifest themselves in symptoms which push her to breaking point. Her anger also means that she cannot see her mother as a subject – a blindness which, in *Mother Right*, Citron attempts to put right by both allowing her to speak directly to camera and by observing her action and agency in the world. *Daughter Rite* in highlighting the wider cultural position of mothering and the apparently universal problem for the daughter to escape a confining femininity imposed by 'mother' belies, as Citron becomes keenly aware, the precise experience of a deeper violence within the family in the same way that the universalizing tendency within psychoanalysis tends to occlude the realities of abuse.

In the second section of this article, I explore how Sarah Polley's film, *Stories We Tell*, tries to re-imagine the mother's desire and, if not to see from her point of view, which is, after all, impossible for the daughter, at least to question the mother's abjection as it figured in *Daughter Rite*. I use the first names of 'Sarah' and 'Diane' to denote the daughter and the mother respectively instead of 'Polley' to avoid confusion. *Stories We Tell* is not, as I have mentioned, a direct or conscious response to the earlier film but its concerns with how to represent mother echo the long line of films on this theme aimed at a female audience from Hollywood melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) to contemporary documentaries in the first person. Most significantly, *Stories We Tell,* mirrors the earlier film in its reflexive interrogation of the home movie from a feminist standpoint, refusing to take at face value its performance of family life as untroubled by conflicting desires, abuses of power and gendered repressions. Clearly, Polley's family history appears to be a much less traumatic one than Citron's, but it also contains secrets which the film both unravels and acknowledges cannot be fully uncovered because of both the vagaries of memory and the fact that Polley's mother, Diane, died when Polly was only 11. The film is, unlike Citron's in that respect, a work of mourning. The film's reclamation of the mother figure as a subject of identification is thus imbued with nostalgia; the mother of Polley's imagination and the memories of those close to her cannot be juxtaposed with a real mother than we can see in *Mother Right*.

Stories We Tell concerns the film-maker, Sarah Polley's, journey to discover her biological father's identity, prompted by the frequent comments that she does not resemble Michael Polley, her mother's husband at the time of her birth. She learns that, in 1972, Diane was cast in a play which took her away from her second husband, Michael to Montreal and for a brief period, back to the profession she loved. Eventually the director discovers that her mother had a secret affair with a film producer, Harry Gulkin, whom DNA tests prove to be in fact her biological father. However, even this seemingly 'scientific' truth is humorously questioned in the final sequence when another actor colleague of her mother's, Geoff Bowes, also admits that he slept with her, throwing into doubt again who her father really is, or more importantly who her mother really was, since she had not one but several secret lovers.

The ostensible plot of *Stories We Tell* – Sarah's search for her paternal lineage masks a question less amenable to narrative investigation – the mother's desire, which cannot be found in the standard documentation of domestic life – the family home movie. In the Polley family movies, shot by Sarah's father, Michael, we see no clues of Diane's illicit relationship and Sarah herself fills in the gaps by directing performed scenes of Diane's visits to Montreal to act and to meet up with her lover, Harry. Sarah Polley unpicks the family film archive in different ways and with a different aim to Citron. Instead of highlighting the repudiation of the mother as Citron does and by implication highlighting her silence and absence, Polley's film is imbued with a profound desire for and identification with her, which acknowledges the limits of both nostalgia and idealization. The film re-casts some of the Oedipal struggles that *Daughter Rite* embodies. Polley is able through her investigation of her mother's 'other life', and her dramatization of it in enacted home movie sequences, to reveal some of the conflicts and sacrifices of being a wife and mother in patriarchal society, attempting to see her mother not only as 'mother' but as a subject with her own desires beyond marriage and family. These dramatized home movie sequences are introduced in the first section of the film intercut with the actual home movie footage (Figures 1A and a 1B) but it is only later when we see these scenes being set up that their status as drama is more overtly revealed.

Spectators may become aware of the differences between actual and staged footage and when/if they do, such juxtapositions encourage an interrogation of which images are fictional and which show the real Diane, the dramatic performances questioning her everyday performance as wife and mother in the family pictures. Gradually it may become apparent that the dramatized home movies reveal situations which no conventional home movie would show – Diane's secret meetings and parties with her lover, Harry, snatched phone conversations with mysterious callers – and the significance of the scenes becomes clear in retrospect as subsequent revelations from Diane's work colleagues lead Sarah to find Harry.

Through the daughter's desire to reconnect with her mother it becomes possible for the mother's desire to be also represented – her desire for sex, love and fulfilment in, and beyond, marriage and children. We discover that, during the early 1960s, Diane lost custody of her children by her first husband when she had an affair with Michael. When Diane was again sexually and emotionally frustrated with her second husband, Michael, she chose to stay with him rather than risk losing her children again and conceal the fact that her daughter Sarah is not his.

The film seeks to avoid a simple dichotomy between the mother and father figures, it acknowledges the daughter's nostalgic desire for the dead mother while also recognizing the parenting, which in this case, has been undertaken by the stepfather, Michael, at least in the wake of her death. The 'father' who has brought up the daughter is not, it emerges, her biological father – he is a father who not only lacks the claim to paternity, but who recognizes his own lack in other respects, as an unfulfilled writer and actor, as unable to satisfy or show affection to his wife, as not the man that the mother thought she was marrying. While lacking or even because of these lacks he has ultimately been able, however, to be a parent, even if not always an ideal one.

Polley's film cleverly deconstructs documentary's truth claims by stressing that each commentator is merely making sense of the past through the lens of their own desire. Sarah asks Michael, Harry, Diane's friends and her children from her two marriages to tell whole story, as they remember it, of their relationships to her mother – different accounts of her emerge showing impossibility of defining who she was. Unlike biographical films that suggest more straightforward motivations and life narratives, *Stories We Tell* echoes the approach to memory of *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988). Morris underlines the ways in which individual memory is filtered through cultural memory so as to create conflicting interpretations of the past. Polley herself cites Lars von Trier's film *The Five Obstructions* (2003) as a more of an influence than 'personal essay documentaries'. In the latter, von Trier asks one of his favourite film-makers, Jorgen Leth, to remake a film of his five times with five different sets of rules; Polley admires the way in which the 'approach to the filmmaking could raise some of the same questions that the subject matter itself was raising' (Holmes, 2013).

Also, we should note that that although we may call a film 'autobiographical' because its content relates to the film-maker's own biography, this does not mean it is 'autobiographical' in the way that traditional written autobiography is, as Annette Kuhn, drawing on Elizabeth Bruss, points out: 'The unity of subjectivity and subject matter – the implied identity of author, narrator and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends – seems to be shattered by film (Bruss,1980: 297, cited in Kuhn, 2010). Both Citron and Polley's films, if they may be described as 'autobiographies' at all given the above caveat, are of the 'revisionist' kind which Kuhn herself has written in *Family Secrets* (1985) where the writers appear 'uncomfortable with the idea of 'autobiographical self' to the degree at least that this self carries connotations of the transcendent ego of bourgeois and patriarchal individualism and the power of the authorial voice' (Kuhn, 2000: 179).

In Polley's film the spectator is offered several different narrations – those of family and friends in the interviews; Polley's own reflections on the process of trying to 're-form' her mother and the narration written and read by Michael Polley. These different stories are interwoven and sometimes contradict each other. One friend says Diane was without guile and another says she was a woman with secrets, emphasizing that the mother acts as a prism through whom different investments and projections are reflected. What the different stories do reveal is that Diane Polley, far from being abject, was an accomplished actor – not least in being able to perform the role of the faithful wife during her affair. This talent connects her intimately with her daughter, Sarah, who is both an actor and a director.
Sarah concludes the prelude to the film by showing the camera/sound set-ups for recording the narration with Michael and interview set-ups with a shot of herself on camera followed by some rushes from an old TV show (or maybe an audition) showing her mother getting ready for her take and then responding jokingly to someone behind the camera with the words 'Who me?'. The humorous juxtaposition is used to flag the link between mother and daughter, made especially uncanny by the cut between the 1960s mid shot of Diane as a young woman and Sarah as a young woman 50 years later. The physical resemblances are clear but more importantly we are conscious of the fact that they are both performers; the daughter rather than taking on the mother's negative characteristics as she does in *Daughter*

Rite, has instead inherited her abilities and taken her creative powers even further by becoming a director.

There is a danger that the absent mother because of her loss is idealized and romanticized and that the father's or paternal voice remains the dominant one just as in *Daughter Rite*, the father is the one who always does the filming and it is for his approving gaze the girls are required to parade in their frocks and frills. Indeed, Sarah chooses to ask Michael, her stepfather, to both be interviewed and uses a 40-page email he wrote on discovering Sarah's paternity as the basis for a voiced over-narration which he reads. However, although the paternal figure is given the role of narrating, his voice is *not* the 'voice of God'. Just as Sarah Polley subverts the father's perspective from the home movies, so her use of his narration is clearly far from being omniscient, but indeed very partial since he has not been privy to his wife's extra-marital relations. He is also subject to the control of his daughter in the film from the start. We see her bringing him to the studio and directing him reading his account of his marriage to her mother (Figure 2). Later we see Michael complaining how his daughter-director tortured him in a previous fiction film she made when she required him to submerge himself in a freezing swimming pool. When she asks him pointed and intimate questions on camera he comments, "What a sadistic director you are", emphasizing not only his daughter's demanding determination to probe the circumstances of her mother's life and death but also the often cruel and intrusive process of documentary-making itself.

The emphasis on the importance of the juxtaposition of different stories about the past, told in different modes (interview, narrated text, dramatized home movie, actual home movie, film and television clips) as a key element of the film again suggests its status as a 'memory text' like Citron's which 'stresses plot over story: the formal structure and organization of the account are typically of much greater salience that its content' (Kuhn, 2000: 190). Despite the ostensible story of trying to find who one is by discovering one's genetic father, the film questions the assumption that biological family is what really matters, unlike many documentaries focusing on a search for 'roots'. In reflecting on his own life story, Polley's father, Michael, comments on how his DNA has formed him going back through generations of his family, but this emphasis on genes is not endorsed by the film, not least through its recognition of Michael's role in Sarah's life. Similarly, her biological father, Harry, has a traditional view of what the real story of the film should be and who should tell it. In his mind, the story is really his as the only one who 'knows' from the inside the details of the relationship that he and Diane shared – she is gone so only he remains to tell the tale. Harry the producer wants the film to fit the conventional structure of a feature film, in other words rather than having the multiple viewpoints of her subject which Sarah's film deploys. [2]

In its compelling re-imagining of the Oedipal scenario, the film emphasizes the daughter's identifications with both father and mother figures, as she works through her nostalgia for her lost mother to come to a recognition of how her identity has been formed through what all parents have given her, and of the part played by Michael, as her stepfather, in forming who she is as much as her biological but absent father, Harry. In an intriguing *mise-en-abyme***,** towards the end of the film we see Polley directing the actress Rebecca Jenkins who plays Diane Polley in Polley's dramatizations of her mother's life. Her role as film-maker parallels that of Michael

who describes his own attempts at being the family's documentarist in his home movies. Sarah Polley not only represents the family's conflicts and secrets, but uses the process to help bring out and transform the buried emotions and aspirations of the participants. She provides a stage not only for her mother's passion, but, in using Michael's text for the narration she gives space to Michael's talents as writer, talents which her mother had also long wanted him to fulfill. At the same time, in producing the film, Polley herself enacts the creativity she has learnt through her identification with both parents, Diane and Michael, in telling a rich and moving story which complicates and expands the family romance. In this respect the film is performative, in the ways that may also be said of Citron's films in that it not only dramatizes the daughter's desire for knowledge of the mother but in Polley's case also enacts the mother's desires and dreams for her husband and her daughter to embrace their creativity and imagination.

These concerns with the meaning and significance of a maternal legacy are also echoed in an earlier film in which Polley performed, which connects with her family history, *My Life Without Me* (Isabel Coixet, 2002). This film unlike the films discussed so far uses fiction to imagine how the mother might be an active participant, in enabling her daughter's separation from her. The perspective of the narration is shifted from daughter to mother, but in this case a mother who is neither the abject as in *Daughter Rite*, nor the impossibly conflicted as in *Stories We Tell* nor engulfed in the tragic regret of maternal melodrama. Instead the young mother, Ann, is able to manage the terms of her separation and mitigate their loss on her own terms.

Sarah Polley plays a young mother, Ann, who is diagnosed with cancer aged 23. Faced with a tragically premature death, Ann writes a list of all the things she wants to do before she dies. These include having sex with a man other than her husband and recording tapes of her thoughts for her husband and for her daughters to play on each of their birthdays until they are eighteen (Figure 3). The echoes with Polley's own mother's history are clear and render the story even more emotive. A recording medium becomes, as it does in *Stories,* the means to bridge the separation of death between mother and daughter. As well as fulfilling her desires by having a secret affair, Ann befriends her new neighbour (also called 'Ann') in the hope that the neighbour can become a mother to her children when she is gone as well as a new wife for her husband. The film does not define Ann solely through her role as wife and mother, as in traditional film melodrama, but affirms her sexuality through the inclusion of the story of her affair with Lee (Mark Ruffalo), and her significance to her friend and colleague, Patsy. While *Stories* tries to rescue Diane from oblivion through memory, the redeployment of home movies and through her re-enactment, *My Life* depicts Ann trying to prevent her own erasure through leaving her recorded voice to her children. At the end of the film, we see Ann lying ill in bed in her trailer home, as her neighbour prepares dinner for her husband and girls. We hear the dying Ann's voice speaking in the second person, "you pray that this will be your life without you. You pray that the girls will love this woman who has the same name as you and that your husband will end up loving her too…"

In these final scenes, there are striking temporal disjunctions: the source and address of Ann's voice as she speaks these words in the second person is uncertain. We finally hear a tape she has recorded for Lee, her lover, where she tells him she fell in love with him, although she says she suspects he knew. Her voice

continues over scenes from after her death: Lee listening to the tape we hear on the soundtrack, her doctor opening the box of tapes she has left behind, her mother chatting happily to a new man, a slow motion scene of her husband and girls getting into a car with the new Ann. The temporality of the sequences again remains ambiguous – are they a flash-forward from an objective camera point of view or are they subjective, from Ann's point of view, as she imagines what will happen to her loved ones in accordance with her wishes?
While these scenes are intended to be moving they do not provoke the tears which Steve Neale associates with classic Hollywood melodrama. Drawing on Franco Moretti, Steve Neale argues that the melodrama of films such as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) rely on the sense of being 'too late' – particularly on recognizing 'the truth' when it is too late as Sarah Jane does in *Imitation of Life* when her mother, whom she has spurned because of her blackness, dies. Crying, Neale argues 'serves to mark and articulate the absence of the mother and the wish for her return, for a state of being prior to this fundamental separation and loss' (Neale, 1986: 19).

My Life Without Me instead suggests that rather than being 'too late' the woman character can attain the object of her desires, despite her imminent death. The film provides a melodramatic scenario as we follow Ann's final days but refuses the traditional temporality of the genre which relies on the poignant impossibility of reversing time. Through her own agency, Ann not only determines the course of her final weeks in systematically ordering and acting upon her wishes but allows her wishes for the happiness of those close to her, as heard in her final voice-over, to be enacted *after* her death. Neither Ann, nor the spectator need time to turn back and be used differently – instead of the past-facing temporality suggested by 'if only', the film offers a vision of female desire in which wishes can be satisfied even while acknowledging loss. The film concludes with Lee purposefully decorating his flat as we hear her Ann's voice in her tape for him saying 'For God's sake, paint your walls and get some furniture – I don't want the next woman you know to run off before she gets the chance to know you'. Her legacy is thus one which provokes less regret or nostalgia but change and the promise of a future. *My Life Without Me* as the title suggests, presents a paradox of the presence and absence of the maternal subject

Ann and Diane Polley as mothers are neither abjected nor rejected as in *Daughter Rite*; *My Life Without Me* and *Stories We Tell* take steps forward in women's cinema in positing the maternal as an enabling force but without idealizing or romanticizing the mother. Michelle Citron arrived at the position of being able to see her mother in her own right through the process of representing her anger indirectly in the ambiguous narration of *Daughter Rite;* in *Mother Right* she attempts a reparation in allowing her mother to appear directly in her own context.[3] While Sarah Polley enacts her mother's wishes creatively and on her own terms in her documentary, Coixet's film also reflects her star, Sarah Polley's, biography imaginatively to evoke the missing mother's voice; the film presents a fantasized life in death or union in separation – a scenario it is able to imagine through the disjunction of temporal frames of the narration and the images. Unusually in cinema it allows the mother an active role in determining her legacy and in seeking to enable her daughters' separation – it points the way forward to a greater representation of the mother as subject free to explore their own ambivalences about the social expectations of maternity.

[1] *Daughter Rite* was discussed in two key feminist film studies of the 1980s among others by E. Ann Kaplan (1983) and Annette Kuhn (1982).
[2] In another ironic example of fiction mirroring fact, Harry Gulkin's most successful film was called *Lies My Father Told Me*. *Stories We Tell*'s focus on an open plurality of narrative and refusal of a territorial approach to truth recalls Polley's representation of the conflicted, and gendered, remembering in her earlier fiction film, *Away from Her* (2006), which is discussed by Sue Thornham (2012).
[3] Citron notes that although the she carefully inscribed a loving point of view in the film this did not prevent negative reactions towards her mother for her choice of lifestyle, work with gay men and distance from her family.

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